

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Right now, there are babies laughing and crying in our world,
and there are parents listening for those wordless cries
and understanding them.

After a few days or weeks of listening intently,
caring for the newborn,
simply being with the baby,

parents learn to distinguish

between the cry that means "I'm hungry -- feed me NOW!"
and the one that says, "Pick me up and hold me; I need to know I'm safe and warm."

Parents learn to tell the difference

between the cry that means the baby is simply bored, or restless, or fretful,
and the cry that means they are in real pain.

And parents learn -- and sometimes learn to dread --

the sound of a baby with a diaper in serious need of changing!

Later on, after parents have mastered the rudiments of the crying language,
the baby begins to laugh --

and parents soon learn to know just what is causing the baby's mirth,
as well as what causes the cries.

This is a language without words, but a language nonetheless!

"In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God."

The Gospel this morning, in the simplicity of John's poetry

reminds us that the Word of God is so much more than the words of God.

God speaks to us through His son,
a son born into this world like any of us,

a son who is entrusted to parents and to the world
like any of us who were born into the world,
a son who cries and laughs like any other newborn.

Jesus enters the world like each one of us,
dependent upon others for survival.

He is vulnerable to hunger and thirst,
to cold and stress,
to infection and accident and mishap.

In fact, if not for the protective love of his parents,

Herod's armies would have found him after his birth and killed him.

"The Word became flesh and lived among us," says the Gospel of John.

In fact, the divine Word became a child; newborn, fragile, and vulnerable,
and as dependent as we all are upon the love of others for survival.

In the birth of Jesus, God reveals what God is and what God's plan for salvation is --
and it turns out to depend on human beings!

This God, who is all-powerful,
who could simply destroy the world and start over again,
Chooses not to.

This God, who could demand, even compel our obedience,
chooses not to.

This God loves us so much
that God chooses to make us --
we fragile, willful human beings --
partners in our own salvation.

God sends the Son, the divine Word of God, born as an infant,
dependent upon Mary and Joseph for his very survival.

God sends the Son to be cared for, protected, listened to --
by us.

Mary and Joseph are entrusted with this precious baby's life,

and through his laughs and cries,
they begin a lifetime relationship with Jesus.

It goes against all our worldly logic
to imagine God as dependent upon us, human beings --
or anything else, for that matter.

Isn't it supposed to be the very definition of God
that God is all- powerful,
needs nobody else, is totally self-sufficient?

How could God depend on us?

But how else do we explain this child given to the world?

The gospels don't claim any special, extraordinary powers for the infant Jesus:
he gives no blessing from the creche,
performs no miracles,
does not speak words the world can even understand.

He is simply a baby like any other baby,
who cries and is dependent upon others
to be fed and cared for and held and loved --
dependent upon others for his very life.

Yet, the Gospel continues: "We have beheld his glory..."

What could that glory possibly be?

The glory in the infant Jesus is that he is the Word,
the message brought from God to humanity through his birth into our world.

The glory in Jesus is God's love for the world,
a love so great that God would choose
to experience our life in the world through God's son.

The glory of this birth is the invitation to share intimately in God's hope for us.

The glory of the Word made flesh
is the deeper sharing of the work of creation with God,
so that God's ultimate hope for us

might become a reality in our world,
and God's kingdom may come into our lives.
Mary and Joseph accepted God's hope by accepting the responsibility
of being earthly parents for a baby sent from God.
They held him and cared for him,
listened to his cries,
and learned to understand what was in his mind and his heart.
They cared for this child and raised him in love.
They gave the child a home,
and found new life in their own relationship with Jesus.
The glory of God lives among us;
the story of Christmas is told and retold day after day
as God invites us to share in the kingdom prepared for us
through God's son.
The story of Christmas, in all its variety,
is the story of the many ways that God's Kingdom enters our lives.
We tell the story not only in words,
but in the language that is beyond words:
The language of how we live.
In our baptismal covenant we promise to
"proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."
And our "example," the way we live,
is part of telling that story;
often the most compelling part.
We should be telling that story all the time,
but it is most urgent,
not in times of comfort and power,
but in times of need;
not in moments of glory,

but rather in calls for help.

And so, the true power of Christmas is

that we experience the grace and joy of Christmas throughout the year
when we open our ears and hearts

to better hear and understand the cries of people who live in need,
who ask for help.

The world associates Christmas with children,

and not just because of the birth of the baby Jesus.

I think one reason we associate Christmas with children

is that children are quick to identify what they want and ask for it --

Often loudly and insistently!

And children are just as quick to show their joy when those needs are met,

and their dismay when they don't get precisely what they asked for.

Both the world and the church

often associate Christmas with the poor and the outcast --

and not just because the story tells us of a traveling family
forced to bed down in a stable.

People who are poor and outcast openly display their needs --

indeed, unlike us, they haven't the means to hide them.

We can tell what they need,

because we can see so clearly what they don't have.

The truth is that all of us have things we want desperately,

though we may conceal our deepest desires under gruff exteriors
or the mask of self-sufficiency.

We all have things we need,

but are so afraid to show our neediness;

to show the ways we feel lonely or left out.

Many of us have lived with this self-sufficient face so long

that it becomes hard to even recognize our own needs,

let alone learn to ask, as children do, for what we want.

At it's core,

Christmas is a story about all of us receiving that which we most want and need:
love -- deep, strong, unconditional love.

The gift of Christmas isn't just the gift of a baby to Mary and Joseph,
the shepherds and the Wise Men.

It isn't just a story about Joseph and Mary being entrusted by God
with the awesome responsibility of caring for God's son.

The Christmas story is about how God so loved -- and loves -- us
that God invites us to be partners in loving the world.

God asks us, like Joseph and Mary,
to learn to hear and understand the cries of infants and children,
And of all people in need.

We are invited into the sacred task of listening and learning to understand
the unspoken cries of all who need to be cared for:
children, families, older people,
people who are sick and poor and needy --
and to each other.

And once we listen and understand, and learn to distinguish among those cries,
to reach out to those in need and respond in unconditional love.

The Gospel proclaims that "The Word became flesh and lived among us."

Mary and Joseph made a loving home for the Word, for Jesus.

Will we?

Will we invite the person of Jesus into our lives?

Will we care for that presence, listen to him crying, love him as our brother?

He is in our world now,

today,

and will be tomorrow, and in the New Year and beyond.

He is with us even in the middle of summer,

when Christmas seems a forever away.

And you can hear him:

He will be in the laughter and cries of children;

he will be in the cries of families who have been broken apart

by poverty and despair and violence;

he will be in the cries of the elderly who are alone and frightened;

he will be in our own cries of pain or loss;

he will be in the laughter of people coming together in love.

The Word became flesh and lives among us.

May each day be Christmas,

and may we tell the story by our lives each day:

the story of how we cared for the presence of Christ entrusted to us,

by caring for each other and for ourselves,

as we listen to the cries and laughter,

and love as we have been loved.

May Christmas not be identified only with the children,

or the poor,

or the outcast,

but with all of us,

as we risk ourselves to love and be loved,

even as God risked to send us his beloved Son,

born to bring us love in the world, and for us to bring love to the world,

in the Christmas season, and in every season!

Amen.